History as a source of critique
Historicity and knowledge, societal change, activism and movements

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Introduction

This chapter foregrounds the ongoing dilemma of the object of public relations research (Edwards, 2012) and of public relations historical research in particular. This public relations problematic affects the ways in which current public relations practitioners and academics understand their respective public relations practices and operating assumptions, and their ability to affect and shape public relations historicity. The starting point for this chapter is that public relations activities have typically emerged at historical points of emerging change, transformation and contestation (L’Etang, 2011, p. 224) and suggests that public relations histories should be repositioned and embedded within histories of broader societal shifts. This historiographically influenced chapter explores the potential contribution of social theory in relation to evolutionary change, public relations processes, and the historical role for public relations work within these in relation to knowledge and information. Insights from social theory are drawn upon to problematise the relationships among and between public relations, societal change and social movements. This chapter offers an interpretation of public relations history and historiography viewed through a focus on activism and social movements, and gives emphasis to the importance of an orientation away from an organisational focus towards positioning public relations as societal change or process (not progress), calling to mind the process sociologist Elias’s concept of flow, Simmel’s flux, vitalism, force and energy drive, and Bourdieu’s creative energies (Lash, 2005; Papilloud & Rol, 2004; van Krieken, 2001). Within the public relations literature, Edwards (2012) drew on Appadurai to describe public relations as flow, highlighting the dynamics of communicative circuits in an approach that was distinctively different to the established portrayal of public relations as organizational function and professionalizing occupation. The chapter is an argument about the necessity to broaden the methodological approaches to public relations history, in particular the way in which public relations historical work is framed by historians – for example within varied concepts and interpretations of modernity, postmodernity, the public sphere, political economy, communicative action, governance and the social imaginary. It is argued that the intersections, processes and dynamics among and between societal change, history, historical knowledge and public relations need closer examination to take into consideration varied levels of analysis and theoretical frames that impact relationships between public
relations and society, and different perspectives and readings of those relationships. This stance situates public relations history much more clearly within social theory and political science and thus contributes further to the ‘socio-cultural turn’ identified by Edwards and Hodges (2011) but effectively a ‘tipping-point’ since a few critical voices had been present, though somewhat muffled, over the previous 20 years. Finally, the chapter argues that by considering history and historical understanding as dynamic and ever-open to new interpretation and meaning, history itself can be a source of ongoing critique.

First, it is necessary to deal with the ontological issues concerning the object of public relations history and the purposes of public relations histories. In other words, what should the history of public relations be, and why? Public relations historiography has identified the distinction between a narrow focus on the named occupation of public relations and the broader approach that encompasses ‘Proto-history’ of earlier eras (Bentele, 1997, 2010, 2013; L’Etang, 1995, 2004, 2008, 2014, forthcoming; Watson, 2014a, 2014b). ‘Proto-history’ is presented by Bentele in a structuralist and, to some degree, progressive, fashion and encompasses practices prior to the establishment of a discrete occupation (public relations). This broader conception stretches through human history to include a range of public communication by regal, political and religious leaders employing a variety of techniques. Typical of this approach in historical public relations literature is that of Cutlip (1995), whose book on US public relations history began with the colonial era and noted the extensive promotional efforts in England to attract immigrants and raise funds; and Cutlip, Center and Broom’s (1994, p. 89) reference to, ‘a farm bulletin in Iraq that told farmers in 1800 BC how to sow their crops, how to irrigate, how to deal with field mice, and how to harvest their crops’.

The inclusive approach to public relations history bears comparison with ideas in the field of rhetorical studies (Lunsford, 2009) which, although it is primarily focused on language within the context of written records and the dissemination of written ideas, also encompasses archaeological inscription (Enos, 2009), the performative (Wilson & Eberly, 2009) and visual rhetorics (including the carnivalesque), an aspect of communication very relevant both to public relations events and to activism. Although public relations literature has engaged with rhetoric in relation to classical critiques of sophistry and the philosophical conceptualizations of discourse and argument (Heath, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2011; Ihlen, 2002, 2009, 2010; L’Etang, 1996, 1997, 2010; Mackey, 2013; Marsh, 2012) it has not given much attention to performative and dramaturgical aspects of monuments and the built environment. Such broader approaches may position public relations history and historiography within histories of public communication.

There are, of course, some interesting questions about why history has become interesting for public relations academics, and the motivations involved. Is it purely about finding out the truth of claims made by many public relations practitioners who, by the nature of their trade, are oh-so-aware of the importance of being ‘the first’? Or is it about finding connections, lineage and respectability? Or from an essentialist perspective seeking some universal societal role? Thus, public relations history may be a quest for respectability or legitimation (part of the struggle for professionalism). This leads to wider questions about the positioning and tensions within public relations and between public relations and the wider world in relation to its role in innovation or tradition, conflict or continuity, and large-scale change such as industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization and globalization. In other words, all public relations histories contribute to different ways of seeing the world as well as specific public relations worlds or spaces.

It is important to combine sociological insights with historical imagination in order to locate public relations in historical action/societal change while taking into account sociological insights. Closer attention to change processes and the spaces in which public relations-type activities occur can lead to (1) closer recovery of public relations antecedents, and (2) public relations
histories that go beyond eventism, and (3) contribute to the development of sociological and critical thinking in public relations – albeit that which is tempered by historical understanding and imagination. This chapter draws attention to activism and social movements since they may be regarded as a form of public relations work concerned with advocacy, promotion, events, lobbying and public affairs, communicating with a wide range of publics, and are clearly directed towards change as a form of social action and the realization of idealized goals. In this way public relations may be understood as intervention directed at collective action, concepts developed sociologically by Touraine (Brincker & Gundelach, 2005; Kivisto, 1984).

The blending of history with sociology has its own history and paradigmatic struggles. These are not the focus of this chapter, although they are, or ought to be, important for all public relations academics tackling historical projects as they affect methodological issues, the tensions between micro and macro levels and overall theorization, as well as important wider considerations such as the role of public relations-type activities in grand transitions such as globalization and neo-liberalism. Self-awareness is also necessary to avoid the trap of ahistoricism – which arises from developmental or evolutionary schemes that can be traced back to Comte and critiqued as mechanistic, and treating "[t]he direction of history as pre-determined, fatalistic, independent of human efforts" (Sztompka, 1986, p. 324).

As noted elsewhere (L’Etang 1995, 2004), initial approaches to conceptualizing public relations history were progressive, based on a particular periodization of US history designed to suggest that public relations practice had developed from basic publicity through public information, to an enlightened, morally desirable and conveniently more effective form of public relations characterized as 'two-way symmetrical communication'. Critiques of the Excellence project, within which the concept of symmetry was located, date back to Pieczka (1996) and challenged the prevailing worldview; as did Motion & Leitch’s (1996) Foucault-influenced work on discourse. Part of the history of the discipline has been the privileging of US accounts and paradigms – to the extent that these were widely and uncritically promoted and adopted in a range of cultural contexts. Increasingly there has been recognition of this cultural imperialism, which is beginning to be corrected (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Maloney, 2006; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Sriramesh & Vercič, 2012) as part of the ‘socio-cultural turn’ (Edwards & Hodges, 2011) that took nearly two decades to gain purchase.

Cultural background is significant in approaches to history and sociological history, and needs to be taken into account in tackling public relations history. As Sztompka (1986, p. 326) pointed out, American sociology had radically different origins to European sociology, and not only had a shorter history but was dominated by,

A single socio-economic system of industrial capitalism and thus unaware of the birth pangs of transition from traditional to modern society, but at the same time [was] exceptionally complex in its racial, ethnic and class composition, ridden with multiple cleavages, contradictions and conflicts.

As a consequence of the historical and cultural context from which they sprang, American sociologists evidently focused on strategies to ensure the smooth functioning of society and were strongly influenced by psychology, social behaviourism, symbolic interactionism and exchange theory, and they were fast to adopt structural functionalism (Sztompka, 1986, p. 327). These important currents can be seen to have shaped the school of American public relations and the take-up of melioristic ideas such as communitarianism, social capital and civil society theses. In contrast, European antecedents (such as Marx, Weber, Gramsci and Lukacs) took a more integrated approach. For example, activistic or praxistic readings of Marx (Topolski, 1968; Sztompka,
1979) as a theory of socio-historical praxis focused on how human agents make history that arises from ‘Double dialectics: of actions and conditions (structures and situations within which people act) and of actions and knowledge (social consciousness)’ (Sztompka, 1986, p. 325).

It is the interplay among and between actors, actions and structures, and the political and symbolic communication and representation of these, that is where public relations-type work is situated. It is present both in the detailed relational dynamics of building support and in the promotional communications on behalf of interest groups, as well as in the symbolic structuring of organization, space and place.

The interrelationships between historical understandings and societal self-understandings, change dynamics and relationships, and ways of interpreting public relations activities and discourse in ongoing contexts, leads us to understand how public relations may be understood as change agent, or as a resistance to change. It may be understood as action and as discourse. Yet generally, as has now been acknowledged, it is explored at organizational rather than at societal levels.

A longer lens, and the use of social theory, may offer new ways of understanding public relations in macro-historical processes, so that public relations history is not solely the history of public relations activities (the occupational development), but rather is positioned more fundamentally within social development. Furthermore, this could trigger an important pedagogical shift from microscopic technical ‘case studies’ that are valued as ‘useful’, and evidence that public relations education delivers ‘transferable skills’, to a broader level education focused on societal dynamics and communication interventions. Macro-sociological and macro-historical approaches may help to generate a new range of critical lines of inquiry central to public relations history/historiography and those who write it – in particular in relation to the following aspects:

• public relations as historical action/change and the multiple levels of involvement/intersections of public relations and the ways in which these affect public relations identities, self-understandings (including public relations academics’ and public relations practitioners’ senses of their own history), historical roles, and history-making activities and productions
• the relationship between agents/actions and structures, social processes and change, and the role of public relations in these dynamic flows, exchanges, accommodations and conflicts
• public relations as the problematic of social change (focus for conflict) – allowing further reflection on the role of public relations in society, social change and societal processes
• an historicist approach to situating public relations activities as part of social change
• the role of public relations in constructing historical understandings
• the role of public relations in societal self-understandings of past and present
• the role of public relations, or public relations activities, in facilitating historicity
• public relations history as social transformation and collective action.

These problematics are important to public relations historians at both phenomenological and historiographical levels because they generate reflexive historical research and thought in the field. It also highlights the necessity for public relations historians to consider their own presuppositions in relation to their historical work, historical theoretical paradigms (e.g. historical structuralism), and the way in which they determine the objects of ‘public relations history’. It also raises questions about where public relations history is located: within institutional history, corporate history, political history, social history or economic history?

The stance taken here is from a conflictual, rather than a consensual perspective. Consensuality has influenced public relations academic values and fashions, both research and teaching. The approach taken here follows Touraine in the notion of conflictual actions
as a counterpoint to Habermas’s focus on consensus-building and integration. Touraine’s emphasis on the centrality of conflictual action means that his concept of communication gives more importance to irreducible differences between participants than it does to consensus-building and projects of reconciliation; instead focusing on conflictual action and difference (Tucker, 2005).

Exploring the overlap and relationship between public relations and social movements, while also drawing on insights from social theory, may be a useful step towards locating public relations within multi-discursive contexts and power struggles. The development of a specialized tradition focusing on social movement rhetoric is a significant source for public relations scholars interested in multi-vocal public address, patterns of public discussion, protest and body rhetorics, and counter-publics (Cox & Foust, 2009). Within social movement theory, some basic questions were asked in the 1980s that are equally relevant to public relations analysts, and not only in relation to social movements.

How should theorists conceive of the relationship between rhetoric and its object – the social movement? Are movements identifiable phenomena whose life and success depend on rhetoric? Should scholarship emphasise theory-building or historical and critical analysis? Should critics conceive of movements as born of, or engaged in, oppositional struggles with rhetorically defined “enemies”?

(Cox & Foust, 2009, p. 610)

The fundamental Othering between activism/social movements and public relations has not always been sufficiently well examined in terms of forces for change and resistance within the public relations literature, or in terms of the internal values, politics and histories of the discipline (but see Holtzhausen, 2011; Demetrious, 2013).

Social movements and activism

In terms of basic definitional hierarchical concepts and linkages, it is possible to understand social movements as long-term campaigns; activism as specific historical events and conflicting agents; and public relations as organizational strategic communication. However, these commonsensical distinctions are not clearly bounded and are open to reinterpretation and new meanings. Approaches to understanding social movements and new social movements (NSMs) are diverse – encompassing the empirical (case studies, campaigns), resource mobilization theory, technological determinism, networks/spaces, political mediation and collective actions. However, as Touraine warned:

If we call any type of collective action a social movement, it is neither necessary nor even possible to theorize it – no more than doctors can theorize spots or fever as a general type of disease, since very different pathologies can generate such symptoms. Those who think they are making an analysis by describing anything that disturbs the social organization as a social movement are saying nothing. The notion of a social movement is useful only if it allows us to demonstrate the existence of a very particular type of social action that allows a social category – and it is always a particular category – to challenge a form of social domination that is at once particular and general. It does so in the name of general values or social orientations which it shares with its adversary, and it does so in an attempt to deny the adversary’s legitimacy.

(Touraine, 2000, p. 90)
Touraine argued that a social movement was much more than issue activism or political lobbying, but that it challenged more fundamental decisions about resource allocation, and, in order to distinguish this more fundamental type of challenge, he promoted the use of the term ‘societal movement’ to describe those that ‘challenge[d] society’s general orientations’ (Touraine, 2000, p. 90). This important distinction should be borne in mind while reading the following review of some public relations sources that may have been influenced by more popular definitional categories that blur the important distinctions that Touraine made, and to which I return later in this chapter.

Public relations and social movements/activism share a number of common features – for example, technical practicalities, campaign focus, and shared challenges of evaluation/impacts. For a substantial period in public relations literature, activism was Othered by a largely hostile public relations dominant paradigm that was reflected in some practitioner worlds; for example, Pieczka’s ethnographic account reported practitioners’ comments that they perceived activists as frightening, disturbing, distorted reflections of themselves (Pieczka, 2006). Holtzhausen (2011) and Demetrious (2013) reversed the dominant trend but literature on activism, both in and out of public relations, is often functional, case-based, trait-based, under-theorized and often not critical (see Amenta, 2014). Earlier sources within public relations include Anderson (1992), Berger (2005), Dozier and Lauzen (2000), Holtzhausen and Voto (2002), Henderson (2005), McCown (2007), Murphree (1991), Stokes and Rubin (2010). Caution should therefore be exercised not to assume that research into activism is necessarily either critical or radical, and to be wary of such paradigmatic claims. Activism may be attractive to those in the critical paradigm, possibly because it is a closer fit with critical scholars’ ideological position and values and because activism is necessarily oppositional, but that does not mean that research itself is critically focused. There are challenging questions to be asked of activists, for example, with regard to propaganda and cultism. Framing public relations as an element within social movements not only repositions public relations ideologically but also challenges those within social movements/activism to acknowledge and face critiques of persuasive communication and propaganda. In other words, it may force those from social movement/activist perspectives to see themselves rather differently as part of public relations practices.

The conceptual relationship between public relations and social movements/NSMs has not been widely subjected to close analysis, but as Eder (2003) pointed out, ‘Movements…create communicative spaces…[they become] the mass carrier of the public sphere.’ Historically, social movements – and particularly new social movements – played their role in a shift in cultural analysis and the cultural turn in historical theory, opening up multiple subaltern perspectives within social history focused on a range of cultural phenomena such as consumption (relevant to both public relations and marketing history) – with much greater focus on meaning (Hall, 2003, pp. 156–7).

According to Cox and Foust (2009) social theorists focused analysis to interpret movements as foci for identity formulation and as a ‘politics of recognition’ offering an alternative to the rational–actor resource–mobilization proponents (Zald & McCarthy, 1979). A cultural discursive turn saw movements increasingly understood as sites for rhetoric and not as univocal unity. In comparison, public relations scholarship still writes of organizations as a single unit and references to ‘society’ and ‘culture’ are also presented as coherent, consensual, functional units rather than sites of dissensus, conflict and dysfunction. Organizational policies and organizational utterances are presented as representative – embodied in the public relations ‘spokesperson’ – yet in public relations literature the politics of organizations is not generally taken into consideration. In fact, this represents a challenging area for empirical study: it is a minefield for research ethics protocols since organizations exert considerable dominance over employees (notwithstanding
claims of ‘engagement’) and reconstruct their identities, daily realities and psyches. The concept of ‘counter-publics’ in organizations is limited to ‘the’ public of trades unions or the ‘employees’ in international/employee communications (who in practice are often subjected to management propaganda).

According to sociologist Touraine (2000, p. 92), traditional social movements aim ‘[t]o abolish a relationship of domination, to bring about the triumph of a principle of equality, or to create a new society’. Such movements are concerned with societal change in relation to human social justice – for example, slavery, worker rights, gender equality, race. The concept of NSMs encompasses a very wide range of expanding issues and rights claims – for example, animal welfare/liberation. Collective action has become fragmented – either defending vested interests, resisting change such as globalization, or engaging in rights appeals for minorities (Touraine, 2000, p. 92). A further category is that of New Religious Movements (NRMs), the last of which have raised issues of distorted manipulative communication/propaganda, a subject given much attention by sociologists and psychologists – for example, Eileen Barker’s work on the Moonies at the LSE in early 1980s (Barker, 1984). The rise of network society (Castells, 1996) highlighted increased technological resources that facilitate social movements and issue groups, and converged media offers multiple opportunities (de Jong, Shaw and Stammers, 2005; Lievrouw, 2011; Meikle & Young, 2012). NSMs employ creative performative techniques not accounted for within the Habermasian public sphere (Tucker, 2005, pp. 42–60). The role of fantasy, creativity, experimentation, playful ness and the social imaginary are central to social change, according to Castoriadis, who considered history to be

> The emergence of the radically new, constantly supplying novel forms to society which can be taken up in the social field. All societies have different modes of “historicity”; their definitions of history…the imagination finds its possibilities in the social historical world.  

*(cited in Tucker, 2005, p. 51)*

The notion of historicity was central to the sociologist Touraine, whose ideas about the potential that social movements and activism possessed to change society, and his thesis of applied sociology, entailed ‘sociological interventions’ that were designed to promote social transformation rather than social integration. He aimed to

Construct the theory of new social movements in the conviction that my theoretical work will have the reflex effect of helping these collective actions to take shape, and that these actions will in fact constitute the struggle of class actors for the social management of a field of historicity.

*(Touraine 1981, p. 42)*

Touraine’s ideas are of interest because they embrace and promote a conflict perspective with which this chapter aligns. Likewise, historical sociologist Tilly conceived of the claims of publics on elites as ‘contenders’, subsequently focusing his research on ‘contention’ and theorizing about ‘contentious politics’ (Tilly & Wood, 2013, p. ix). Touraine’s ideas fed into the conception and development of action research (recently taken up in public relations by Pieczka & Wood, 2013). Not only does his approach offer relevant critique about the purposes of history, it also offers considerable inspiration and an insight into a conflictual approach to public relations that presents an alternative to the heavily promoted values of consensuality, negotiation, symmetry and dialogue. These ideas are now briefly discussed within the limited context of their
implications for public relations historians, and their insights into their underlying assumptions and values.

**Historicism and historicity**

These broader questions are relevant to public relations historians at both phenomenological and historiographical levels in order to generate reflexive historical research and thought in the field.

Historicity may be understood as the ability of society to initiate and shape its own history, and to reflect and act and be informed by history. The concept raises questions about how historical meaning is generated, circulated and revised in ways that makes society possible in the context of a backdrop of continuous change, flux and transformation. The role of communications and communicative agents within this is clearly relevant to an understanding of public relations history and antecedents. Historicity is thus part of inter- and intra-societal dynamics that in itself generates action. It is therefore a creative process arising as ‘self-product of society’ (Touraine, 1977). Historicity is thus a process. The past is a raw material for constructing social reality within constraints (Sztompka, 1986); or, as Dubos put it: ‘The past is not dead history, it is living material out of which man makes himself and builds the future.’ Historicity generates knowledges and shapes understandings and flows of current understandings; therefore control of historicity is of importance to any community. For example, it might be argued that journalists and journalism, and media studies academics, have appropriated public relations historicity and in doing so have largely shaped cultural insights and knowledges about it; there continues to be an ongoing struggle between the collective actors in the fields of public relations and journalism.

Historicism resists the objectification and theorization of concepts across time, arguing, for example, that ‘class is a relationship, not a thing, defined by men as they live their own history’ (Thompson, 1963, pp. 9–11). Such approaches resist any ‘supra-historical framework or any theoretical modelling of generic social processes’ (Hall, 2003, p. 155).

The notion of creativity provides an alternative conception of the public sphere, as discussed by Castoriadis who highlighted ‘the centrality of fantasy and image rather than rationality as a key to understanding individual and social change’ (Tucker, 2005, p. 42). For Castoriadis (1987, pp. 264–5) the social imaginary was informed by history as

The emergence of the radically new, constantly supplying novel forms to society which can be taken up in the social field. All societies have different modes of “historicity”, their definitions of their history. But most historians and social scientists adapt a causal social scientific or historiographic model that limits their understanding to the repetition of the same, events tied to one another, inhibiting their understanding of the possibility of new historical configurations.

Public relations historical work is in its early stages and generally descriptive and explanatory, and contextualizing its emergence – but there is potential for more creative and playful explorations that acknowledge the limits of frameworks.

In Touraine’s account, communication is seen as focused around ‘[t]he conflictual appropriation of historicity by collective actors who struggle for control of it’ (Arnason, 1986, p. 144). It is this insight that suggests the importance of considering the relationship between public relations and social movements, and the role of public relations in societal conflict or struggle – including discursive struggle. It also raises interesting questions as to the object of public relations research and the politics of the discipline in relation to its scope and focus. Touraine argued that
The study of society should be replaced by the study of social action [and that we should] reorganise our representation of social life around the notions of social movement, structural conflict and cultural stakes [resources and goals] which are valued and desired by two or more opponents, the most important stake being social control of the main cultural patterns...through which our relationships with the environment are normatively organized...[and] the study of strategies, organization and decisions.

(Touraine, 1985, cited in Arnason, 1996, p. 140)

For Touraine there was a privileged relationship between social movements and historicity; he saw social movements (which he later described as societal movements) as a new paradigm of societal change, causing ongoing interactions and confrontations in time and space, all caught up in macro-historical processes beyond their control. According to Touraine:

The historical system of action, the political system and the organizational system are intermediate levels between the analysis of historicity and that of concrete social units delimited in time and space and responding to historical situations … the transformation of historicity into functioning systems and organized collectivities.

(Arnason, 1986, p. 144)

Touraine argued that struggles in post-industrial society were about information in the cultural sphere; and that consequently, social movements and conflicts struggle for control of historicity (Brincker & Gundelach, 2005, p. 366). Directed and intentional communication – public relations – is crucial to these discursive battles. Touraine’s analysis highlights multiple entwined dimensions across societal spaces within which exist discursive power struggles for the control of historicity. Thus, public relations history has a place in political science and sociology within the dialectics of action, structure and process. Public relations and public relations history is part of the generation and circulation of meaning about itself and other primary sponsoring agents. Touraine argued that there remains a central conflict in post-industrial technological/information society that profoundly affects the ability of people to live together,

Can we live together, or will we allow ourselves to become trapped in our differences, or to be reduced to the status of passive consumers of a mass culture produced by a globalized economy? ....Will we become Subjects, or will we be torn, as the whole of social life tends to be torn, between the world of instrumentality and the world of identity? The central conflict in our society is being waged…by a Subject struggling against the triumph of the market and technologies, on the one hand, and communitarian authoritarian powers on the other. This cultural conflict seems to me to be as central to our society as economic conflict was to industrial society, and as political conflict was to the first centuries of our modernity.

(Touraine, 2000, p. 89)

The struggle identified by Touraine raises challenges for the social legitimacy of formal organizational public relations, and also raises questions about individual public relations access, literacies and capacities. The challenge for public relations historians and critics is to trace the role of public relations within processes of the webs of institutionalization, production, marketisation and political economy; and to reconsider the implications for understandings of public relations’ societal roles.
Conclusions/implications

This chapter has argued that public relations histories are not fixed static entities, but rather fluid interpretations centred on societal flux and transformation, linked to social movements and activism, and embedded in cultural dynamics and a range of public communication. Understanding public relations in history, and public relations’ history-making as blending processes of flow, flux and dynamic energies of dominance positions, the public relations historian is a discursive agent creating texts that generate meanings that are open to new interpretations within and without public relations scholarship and public relations practice communities. Histories contribute to individual and group identities over generations (including the identities of public relations practitioners and activists), and are therefore significant considerations for organized communication, and, indeed, may well be at the root of action. The historian thus plays a crucial role in facilitating ongoing debate within public relations scholarship and practice in terms of knowledge exchange that can help practitioners to reflect upon their historical and societal roles and relationships, and to take actions informed by those histories. Public relations histories that take a sociological slant contribute insights into the conflicts that trigger the need for organized communications, and the various change agents that contribute to that debate. Historicity conceptualizes history in society as a site of struggle over social change and cultural patterns (Touraine, 1985 cited in Arnason, 1986: 140) and such struggles entail rhetoric and persuasion.

Historical understandings and reflections of past societal alignments, social movements and activism can inform ongoing and critical interpretations of past and present public relations practices. These practices include activities that may not be described as public relations, sometimes for ideological reasons. Placing public relations on a continuum that links it to propaganda and persuasion, and activism and social movements, positions it as one of a series of linked activities and terms engaged in the rhetorical and political contexts of societal conflict and change. For this reason public relations histories can be usefully considered by a broad range of philosophical, political and social theorists. Public relations historians are central to understanding how historical meanings about public relations are communicated and debated within the context of societal change, both past and present; and how those understandings inform ongoing and future change. The fluid metaphors promoted in this chapter offer an alternative to the archaeological and sedimentary propositions of Bentele (2010) and permit reflexive histories and historicities that facilitate debate and deeper understandings of the social imaginary (Taylor, 2003).

The chapter has also argued for repositioning public relations as part of wider social change and movements, rather than as a discrete story. Understanding public relations in this way interprets its emergence as part of the professionalization of social movements – a phenomenon that has already been critiqued within activism literature because the institutionalization associated with professionalization is already evident through the disproportionate recruitment of middle class activists and the fear of ‘social movement bureaucrats, more interested in forwarding their own organizations and careers than in the welfare of their own constituencies’ (Tilly & Wood, 2013, p. 157). Such pessimism continues to have purchase in discussions about the role of public relations in society, and in claims that are made about its ethics and contribution to democratic practice. At the same time, it highlights the need for continuing debates about the construction and interpretation of historical texts in relation to ongoing interpretations of what counts as public relations work and spaces. Communications practitioners’ engagement with the processes of self-understanding in
relation to their historical role in societal change and history’s role in society and societal transformation may contribute a less dichotomous understanding of relations between public relations and activism and their societal, as well as organizational locus.

References


